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ABSTRACT

Those in composition studies know, experientially, that teaching informs their lives and results in knowledge, but they also know that English Studies culture(s) continue to valorize expert knowledge over community knowledge, empirical and scholarly research over alternate methods of constructing inquiry, and theory over practice. Although cognitive models and insights can illuminate the steps students and teachers go through in writing, only a well-trained teacher has a hope of navigating the interrelated cognitive and affective terrain of the classroom. Many composition teachers teach from an unexamined passion for writing and writers and because they love the profession, though they may well abhor their professional conditions. A composition teacher realized that her poems, and more recently her literacy autobiographies (self-assigned in teacher-education classes she teaches) offer her valuable new modes of understanding herself and her professional life. One poem in particular, written to explore the contradictions one of her African-American students was experiencing, became the seed of subsequent professional work. Practitioners in the underclass of composition are agitating for enfranchisement through professional conferences and caucuses. Other "movements" are destabilizing the status quo: portfolio evaluation, writing across the disciplines, calls for abolition of the universal first-year requirement, and teacher research. Composition teachers have to vote with their experience and their reflection on that experience, and they will find it a powerful force at the institutional polls. (RS)

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Another Kind of Vote: Enfranchising the Knowledge(s) of Teachers

> In other words, much of what especially teachers, and to a lesser extent writers, have claimed to know about writing has been ignored, discounted, or ridiculed--so that, despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge-makers in their own field. (3)
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> Stephen North *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*

Whether our schools are research or teaching institutions, in most, value remains fixed on research and scholarship at the expense of practice. This is particularly true for those in composition studies who still struggle for recognition for co-authored and collaborative writings, for textbooks that put theories and research about writing into productive practice in the classroom, for scholarship and research that begins with teaching questions and, after study, ends with change in the teacher, her students or their communities at large. We know, experientially, that teaching informs our lives and results in knowledge, but we know also that our English studies culture(s) continue to valorize expert knowledge over community knowledge, empirical and scholarly research over alternate methods of constructing inquiry, and always theory over practice.

To understand how we might better argue the value we find and experience in teaching, I want to examine briefly the forces, legacies, beliefs, and systems that continue to disenfranchise teachers, and then also to look at promising areas where forces are being disturbed, legacies examined, beliefs counter-argued, and the traditional scholarly system as a whole challenged.

Our beliefs in the primacy of theory and research over teaching rest on our beliefs in empirical (often [mis]defined as only positivistic) methods of research and decontextualizd hermeneutical analysis. When cognitive research began to give our field status in the 1980s, we became--perhaps--too identified with that singular, social sciences mode of clinical research. Living, as many of us do, within skeptical English departments, there was some satisfaction in being able to say "research" says this or that to our higher status literature colleagues. And, like the majority of Americans, we feel a science-worship ourselves (though science itself is critiquing the cool tropes by which it obscures its own complicated community contexts). We were, it seems, swept up in the rush to develop a grand, unified theory of the writing process, even as our classrooms were becoming more diverse and in some senses therefore more singular.

Although I am as a teacher grateful for cognitive models and insights that illuminate the steps my students and I may go through in writing, it was also clear that my 99% Navajo students in Tsaile, Arizona, had different composing contexts than do my 90% Anglo students, these days, in Tallahassee Florida. And indeed, ethnic and racial contexts aside, the students in either of those classrooms will always write within the complicated matrix of their daily lives. Last term, students' writing process narratives again highlighted that experiential diversity--from a young man whose parents were divorcing at Thanksgiving; to a young woman pregnant and estranged from her abusive husband; to an older woman, a state worker, who was in two catastrophic car accidents; to another young man who just didn't feel like he wanted to do schoolwork anymore. Students' lives impinge on their writing processes in serious ways that are seldom studied. The cognitive problem-solving model cannot of course provide an equation for how these students might best be helped to write

better----only a well-trained, invested, interested teacher has a hope of navigating the inter-related cognitive and affective terrain of the classroom.

And it strikes me these days that it is the affective terrain that has been neglected, on several levels. There appears to be a field-wide refusal to deal with the content of student writing and the contexts of students' lives. I am not suggesting here that I become my students' professional counselor, knowing fully how untrained and unequal I am for that task. But I'm perplexed by the degree of professional horror I raise when I suggest that I be a human(ist) in the classroom, that one part of the negotiation all writers partake in is that of their own lives; I welcome a book like Robert Brooke's *Writing and Sense of Self* that looks at the individual within the structure of the workshop and Lad Tobin's recent *Writing Relationships* for the assertions it makes that what we do as teachers is imbeded in relational processes. If relationships in the classroom represent sticky, dangerous territories--the La Brea tarpits of the mind--they are also the glue of writing as I know it and must be addressed.

Let me go back to my student who mentioned that his parents were divorcing. He lingers in my mind as a still-needing-to-be-understood teaching moment. On a fairly dull, Tuesday before last Thanksgiving, I asked my students to complete a sure-fire invention exercise--writing fifteen metaphoric responses about a person about whom they had strong feelings--to be turned, later, into a portrait poem. I started the exercise near the end of class, and, after most students had packed up and swept out, I waited impatiently for this young man to finish--I was ready for Thanksgiving break too. I was surprised that he was still writing away--he usually was fairly perfunctory about the class. He looked up, said, "this is a neat exercise. I think I found a poem." My teacher-self preened, and I almost replied before he said, "I don't

really want to go home, my parents are getting a divorce and it's going to be strange." My teacher-words died in my throat. I myself had had a difficult fall term, personally, and I felt unable to respond, unable to offer either the dismissive brisk or the emphatic supportive reply. It bothers me now to think of that pedagogical pause as I froze for a moment, saying nothing. I hadn't been writing along with my classes as I often do and feel I always should, and I was distant from the teaching moment, deciding, finally, on a non-committed:--"Oh, well, good. Great, I'm glad you found something." For me, that moment represents the opportunity, the danger, the lure and the confusion that teaching writing has always had for me--and because of my own busy life context, I willed it out of being--did not talk about the purposes or results of the activity, did not talk about how writing leads into and out of living, talked about nothing. The longer I teach, the more clearly I realize, my own and my students' lives are really at the center of what I do, however well or poorly I do it.

So I've been thinking about our profession-wide, abysmal lack of discussion about teachers' motives. Why do writing teachers, nationwide, labor so hard and long and with so little pay at this profession? Why do we seldom talk about the emotional value of our work (we talk just a little more about the emotional toll). Many of us teach from an unexamined passion for writing and writers--for readers and the texts that have formed our lives--and because we love the profession, though we may well abhor our professional conditions.

I can hear a question (one I ask myself), what then should teachers do, how should they speak, and where? I've been thinking back over moments that brought me to this argument--that teachers should be telling about their emotional lives as teachers. We're in a profession-wide state of denial if we don't admit that most of what goes on in our classrooms is about being writers who are humans. A year and a half ago, for

instance, I was at several sessions at the New Hampshire Conference on the writing process movement and I was struck by the number of times that conference speakers recited poems--by others or their own--about what they do. As a teacher of poetry, I've learned that most of my students harbor a hidden "high school" poet inside themselves, and I know, from working with new teachers of writing, that many in English studies came to be where they are through their aspirations to write like author X, Y, or Z , to make, to create texts. I thought of the pleasure I've had in the last few years sending pedagogical poems to *CCC* and *Rhetoric Review* . I started sending them because I had been trained in poetry workshops not to write poems about writing. Since I like to do best what I'm told not to do, I've become fascinated with that forbidden genre.

I continue writing in this manner, though, because I realized my poems, and more recently my literacy autobiographies, self-assigned in teacher-education classes I teach, offer me valuable new modes of understanding myself and my professional life (which more and more is becoming intertwined with my understanding of my personal life). Thinking about teaching by writing, informally, in mixed genres, helps me solve or at least think differently, productively, creatively about teaching problems. In a poem that I'll read in a moment, I use poetry in James Britton's sense of exploratory writing: my informal thoughts shaped into verse because verse shaping comes by now fairly naturally to me as a mode of thinking.

Joal was taking my poetry class while enrolled in the first-year writing class of a teacher I had educated to teach writing. Joal was "hearing" different writing rules in each class and became confused by the apparent contradictions. I could explain this student to you in a *TETYC* essay, using Mike Rose's valuable work on writing block, illuminating the way heuristic rules-of-thumb can inhibit a writer when she applies

them algorithmically to all writing situations. And I understood this student's confusion immediately on that level. What I wanted to understand though, was the context of this confusion, my own mixed messages of training her teacher to carry out academic writing instruction in one way while in my own classes I asked this student to write in another way. And I wanted to understand this contradiction at all the levels this African-American student was experiencing them, and these included her attempts to negotiate her identity and my authority as a teacher she respected but didn't fully understand. This poem then was written to explore a teaching issue; it is also a personal communication, for I gave her a copy before the class was over.

The poem preceded by this explication can't help but seem anti-climactic and that in one sense is just my point: it's aesthetic success is less important to me then and now than what it taught us both, than its process. And this, of course, is one of the modes of valuing in teaching that I think we are ignoring (think of the many marvelous hidden teaching journals that exist around the country). Here's the poem:

JOAL

tells me her other teacher
asks for "no metaphors, please,"
in the personal narrative,
tells me her poetry teacher,
me, asks for "images and no clichés
and the five senses, use them concretely"
but weirdly
make lungs ring like brass bells
make skin feel hot and foolish like caramel,
make eyes track lucid questions in sky blue--
guides to coax the day into formal

shapes she's hesitant to use.
Joal asks me, can she put metaphors
in poetry? Can she use her own words
like chitterlings and cornbread?
Pushed back from a heavy desk,
I see blocks of days,
some for creating, some for composing.
Then I say "yes." Yes.
Southern fried and hamhocks steaming,
naps, and plaits twisting patient hands.
I share my mother's lost Norwegian
farmlands and lilting syllables
flattened, all rules followed.
Joal listens between
the messages. Thanks me.
Her next poem, "When I Was
Black," her best.

This poem also became the seed of subsequent work. It led me to continue thinking about feminist issues (why am I a good girl--following the rules--as a student and as a teacher?) and why do I agree to teach by genres, tacitly valorizing poetry over first-year writing? Writing this teaching poem, led me in part to a multi-genre creative writing textbook, to essays arguing that we should teach to the commonalties in writing processes not to genres. This is a final draft poem then for the classroom issue it explored, for Joal and me, and a first draft of a great deal of subsequent professional work.

The weekend I heard teaching testimony through poetry at the New Hampshire conference was a turning point for me. I noted convergences in my own teaching history that led me to these remarks today--I saw how the Joal poem was a way of thinking; as were the poems read and teaching stories told on those days. That

conference, in fact pushed me to value what I do, to include poetry in other formal composition essays, to continue to argue that students' voices, if I study students, should be part of all my writings.

I also see teaching and writing about teaching not simply as pedagogical or personal inquiry but also as civic action. I need only to think of my own dissertation director, Don McAndrew. When we get together to share a beer and teaching stories, we don't swap academic citations, we talk about our teaching, share what does and doesn't work. We talk about our writing, explore why we do it, what it means to have done it. We consider our profession--ask tough questions about our places in it. It's love and passion for a profession that can make the teachers that we are consider leaving the classroom sometimes when we feel we may not make a difference. It's love and passion and concern that sent this professor into his children's local school district to offer fifty free inservice days in whole-language workshops over a two year period. He knew there were better ways to teach, and because he did, he had to share them. It is this type of committed teacher who grounds the teacher-research, expert-practitioner movement for me: I'm not talking about all of us going out and volunteering more time. We're overworked as it is, most of us. But I do argue that it is this type of teacher, along with Nancy Sommers and Lynn Bloom and Mike Rose, who should be writing their teaching autobiographies, and exploring their teaching histories in print. When they won't, don't, or can't, I believe all of us who are hearing these stories should take note and pass the stories on: a pedagogical potlatch that moves beyond *mere* lore in order to highlight, value, respect, draw our attention to other ways of knowing, and saying, and being in the professional world.

Teachers feelings and states of mind and stories, have long gone unvoiced except in conference and mailroom talk, mutual commiseration at meetings, gta seminars,

adjunct inservices, and so on. Our humanistic valorization of reading and writing (particularly with the goals of creating or commenting upon artistic literary artifacts) insists on a view of texts as trans-cultural, and ideologically free, and such texts need priests (or scholars) rather than practitioners (or teachers) to help elucidate their mysteries. The continued stratification of English Studies through field-coverage and vertical job descriptions and department structuring, polarizes the workers of our field into haves and have-nots, a division some feel is being replicated in the sub-field of composition studies as boss-compositionists (Jim Sledd's term) use theory and research to secure their jobs while non-tenure line workers focus (or are focused) increasingly on practice.

What is changing and challenging these conditions? Certainly practitioners in the underclass of composition are agitating for enfranchisement through professional conferences and caucuses and the Wyoming Resolution. Other "movements" are afoot that are destabilizing the status quo in interesting ways: portfolio evaluation, writing across the disciplines, calls for abolition of the universal first-year requirement, teacher-research, and so on. We are recognizing and celebrating politically positioned practitioners (like Paulo Friere and others), and considering how theory and practice function as an intersection rather than a division (this occurs, for instance, in the work of Robert Scholes and was addressed in many papers at the New Hampshire conference on the writing process movement). Post-structural critical discussions are providing ideas and a vocabulary that may allow teachers to argue against the binary and oppositional thinking that has marginalized them. Phenomenologically-based ethnographic research and context-based hermeneutical research offer opportunities for teacher-researchers and rhetoric and composition students/scholars to investigate contingent theory as an alternative to empirically-grounded attempts to create a unified theory. And practitioners of ethnographic

writing research are engaged in fascinating questions: what is the relationship of ethnography to teacher-research? To what degree is the ethnographic subject less about studying an "other" culture than studying the researcher as "other" in relation to a culture? Postmodern anthropology and feminist theory suggests alternative ways of reporting both practice and research--honoring story, testimony, observational anecdote, informal analysis, regularized lore and so on--and these movements may connect some of us back to our humanistic roots as writers and readers of fictional and factional texts. These are certainly new ways teachers may choose to "vote" within the English department and new choices are leading to profound questioning of traditional ways of making knowledge, as we ask what is valuable as research and publication and what is learned in doctoral exams and what voice(s) should be allowed in dissertations.

In this talk, I have been interested in noting the forces and conditions that are prompting me at this point in time to review and insist on the enfranchisement of teacher knowledge(s) in composition and in English Studies.

Thought A: Things are changing because we're broke and will probably continue broke (and I think perhaps it's not a bad thing). If we were rich, I think theory and practice would divide even more firmly than they sometimes even now seem to do. My department can't afford research assistants for me and I in turn have come to value the fundamental (re)grounding I receive when I research my classroom myself--I'm hopeless, I fall in love with my data as I have with the process of learning to make knowledge out of my teaching.

Thought B: Many of us in composition/English departments are people who care deeply about reading and writing, and we need to testify and practice more visibly.

We need to really question the ways we make students (first-year and graduate) produce texts we don't value and the way we agree to do this ourselves for academic promotion. We'll gain power if we refuse trends or theoretical movements that don't fit; yet, we'll only know, that they don't fit, of course, if we try them on, test them in the crucible of the classroom.

Thought C: If we're not paid well for our work, we need to manage it better. Not take it home, not take it desperately to heart (I think often of a woman at a summer WPA conference sobbing at a dining hall table because of her horrific job conditions). We need to be more playful and tell more praise stories. For instance, there are many reasons I love being a teacher and even this talk is too empty of them. I value the way it lets me talk about and practice my favorite subject, writing; the ways students change and allow me to participate in that change; and the way my work puts me in touch with like-minded, intelligent, committed colleagues around the country.

Thought D: Some models and practices are enduring because they allow for the personal and public to co-exist, to communicate. I'm thinking of the way my expressivist heart negotiates daily with my social-constructionist brain, and how, as a writer and teacher of writers I wouldn't have it any other way. I've been struggling for years now to take the "creative" out of certain genres of writing and to (re)consider the active, creative wellsprings of all passionately engaged writers and writing.

Thought E: If we accept the job description of writing teacher, then theory and practice must form a web, a network, a circle, an interconnected chain, a dialog, a mutual refrain in our teaching. We have to vote with our experience and our reflection on that experience and we'll find it an incredibly powerful force at the institutional polls--no matter what the election or who is running.